

“How are you?”
Parshat Shemini
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April 21, 2012

The crowd at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival outside Providence, gasped and then cheered wildly this past week when more than 15 years after he was fatally shot, rapper and hip hop sensation Tupac Shakur stepped out on the stage, gave shout outs to Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg, and started working the stage. He moved and rapped and even seemed to interact with the audience at one point calling out “Coachella!” – the location where the concert was being held.

Of course it wasn't real – Tupac Shakur really is dead – and what the concertgoers were experiencing was a clever digital manipulation – a modern update on an old-fashioned stage illusion. But for those who were there – it felt real. They knew he was dead – but it sure felt like he was there among the living – up on stage, just like they remembered him. By all accounts – it felt very strange. It is a feeling that is not totally unknown to the rest of us. Because photography and movies can now preserve performances for – well forever – we can actually see and relive moments – capture images of life, long after those in these movies and clips are long gone.

Dick Clark passed away this week. And the news reports played clips from American Bandstand from 30 and 40 years ago – and the experience was somewhat disconcerting. The newscaster was telling us that this man was no longer alive – but the pictures on our screen revived old memories – and for just a second – he and we were not sitting in 2012 – but in 1962 or remembering a New Years long lost. If somebody had been sitting next to me – they would describe a 60-year-old man watching a newscast about the death of an 82-year-old TV personality – but that was not what I was experiencing. While my 60 year old body sat in that chair, watching the newscast, – my soul was transported back to 1964 – Dick Clark was still alive and I was so very much younger that the man who sat in my living room.

Now all of this has been made possible thanks to the wizardry of modern technology. What those concert goers near Providence experienced, what I experienced watching those old clips of Dick Clark were thanks to developments that are, in the history of mankind – fairly recent. This out of body experience, this bizarre disconnect between body and soul, today and yesterday – this is something of which our ancestors could not possibly have been aware – or could they?

My good friend and colleague Rabbi Charlie Klein reminded me of a particular comment by Rashi – the 12th century medieval French rabbi and scholar on an aspect of today's torah reading.

Today's torah reading contains the description of the consecration of the *mishkan* – the sacred tabernacle that would be the center of Jewish worship for the next 1300 years of Jewish history. It describes the inauguration of Aaron and his sons – as the *Kohanim* who will be instrumental in the Sacred Service of the *Mishkan* and later the Temple. And immediately following this dedication something strange and tragic occurs. In Leviticus 10:1-2 we read: “Now Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord, *eysh zarah*, alien fire, which God had not enjoined upon

them. And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord.”

This is one of the most discussed and debated sections of the torah. For thousands of years rabbis and scholars have struggled to make sense of what Nadav and Avihu did and why they did it – and they have struggled as well to make sense of what God did to them – and why He did it. Some have suggested they did a terrible thing – bringing disrespect to the holiest place on God’s earth. Others suggest they just got carried away – and were so passionate in their love for God that they overstepped the bounds of the acceptable. But none of the myriad of comments on this challenging passage is more intriguing than Rashi’s. Commenting on the description of the deceased men being carried from the camp by their tunics, Rashi writes: “This tells us that their garments had not been destroyed by fire, but their souls alone—as if two strands of fire had entered their nostrils.”

This is a very strange comment. According to Rashi, Nadav and Avihu’s clothing and bodies remained intact with no signs of burning; they had been struck by fire inwardly. What Rashi is doing here, is what he does in so many of his insightful comments – he is reading our sacred Bible very carefully. If you look at Leviticus chapter 10 verse 5 which can be found on page 634 in our *Eytz Hayyim humashim*: “They came forward and carried them out of the camp by their tunics, as Moses had ordered.” I can almost picture Rashi sitting there, contemplating these words - - he thinks out loud – “why does the torah offer the seemingly superfluous words “by their tunics.” Would it not have made sense just to say, “they carried them out of the camp, as Moses had ordered.” Why did we need to be told –that they were carried “by their tunics.” Wait a minute – turn back a page – look what verse 2 says, “And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them...” If fire consumed them, how could they be “carried out of the camp by their tunics”? Would not their tunics have been consumed with them in the fire? And it is this textual contradiction that causes Rashi to suggest, “This tells us that their garments had not been destroyed by fire, but their souls alone—as if two strands of fire had entered their nostrils. Nadav and Avihu’s clothing and bodies remained intact with no signs of burning; they had been struck by fire inwardly.”

One commentator took Rashi’s insight even a step further and suggested - -that this fire that consumed them inwardly, the one that left their bodies intact – it meant that Nadav and Avihu continued to walk and talk – to all outward appearance they appeared alive – their unique punishment was that they were physically alive but spiritually dead. It was only their inwardness that was consumed – their bodies remained untouched!

I guess you might say – they looked a lot like Tupac Shakur must have looked to those concert goers in Providence – or how Dick Clark appeared to me as I watched the news of his death. I knew he was no longer there but he sure looked like he was. If this commentary is correct our ancestors had the same experience. Nadav and Avihu continued to walk and talk in their midst but everyone knew they were no longer really there.

Nadiv and Avihu became the poster boys for what some rabbis considered the worst fate a person could suffer: being physically alive and spiritually dead. Ironically most of us today would not consider that such a terrible fate. And therein lies my challenge for this morning. If you had to choose between being physically alive and spiritually dead or spiritually alive and physically dead, which would you choose?

I contend that in 2012 most of us would choose to be physically alive – at any cost. Upon what do I base this contention? Well, it seems to me we are a society obsessed with preserving youth and prolonging life. No expense is too great, no procedure too painful, no diet too difficult, no regimen too demanding – if it merely promises the hint of a hope of a possibility of youth or longevity.

Studies seem to indicate that fish oil can help you live longer. How many here are now taking a daily regimen of fish oil? Chocolate is bad for you – stop eating it. No wait - it is good for you – start eating it. I mean really do I need to invest more time in making this? Is it not self evident that in our contemporary society if you can even claim that your product will make you look younger or live longer you are well on your way to becoming a millionaire.

Take Dick Clark (may God rest his soul.) We loved him precisely because he never seemed to get any older. Year after year we tuned in on New Year's Eve and there was something so reassuring about seeing Dick Clark at Times Square, looking the same as always. If he, on that side of our television screen, did not look a day older than last year certainly we, sitting and watching on our side of the television screen, did not look any worse for the wear either. Or so we desperately wanted to believe.

As a rabbi, I spend much of my time ministering to people who appear unchanged on the outside - but on the inside – I know they have been totally and completely consumed, destroyed, devastated. They look the same but I know they are not. They walk through the same world, the same job, the same house, the same community but something – the loss of a loved one, the failure of a business enterprise, the depression of a child, the list goes on and on – these things that destroy our souls but leave our bodies in tact.

“How are you?” We ask. “I’m fine” they respond – and well, they look fine – so we move on to talk about sports or fashion or other inconsequential subjects. But the truth is they are not fine. We are not fine. Look around you. Doesn't everyone look fine? So did Nadav and Avihu – they looked just fine.

My friends, the rabbis had it right and we have it wrong. We spend all of our time, effort and money tending to our bodies and ignoring our souls. We invest enormous effort to make sure we look good and in fact we look just fine and all the while we make sure to hide the pain that resides deep inside.

I wonder if any of Nadav and Avihu's friends ever realized they were dead? Or did they just go on for years - bumping into people – exchanging niceties – “You know Shirley, I bumped into Avihu at the gym this morning – what a nice guy – always a big smile on his face – and he looks great! I wonder what he does to keep fit, to keep looking so young? I'll have to ask him his secret next time I see him!”

Tupac Shakur is dead; has been for some time now – but his music still lives and that is what is important. Each of us has the power to create moments that will long outlast our lives. We can cultivate our bodies or we can cultivate our souls. That time you invest in your body – it may buy you a few years – but that time you invest in your soul – it can buy you eternity.

When your children and your grandchildren will look at your picture – after you are gone – do you want them to remember a young face – or a young soul; that perfect smile (purchased at great expense) or the laughter that was in your heart that was so freely given?

The rabbis used today's torah portion and the example of Nadav and Avihu to teach that there is no fate worse than being physically alive and spiritually dead. From where I stand here on this bema – I can see is a sanctuary filled with people who are physically alive but only you know the condition of your soul.

Does your soul need a little more exercise? We are here to help. Does your soul need a face-lift? We are here to help. You see here, in this place - -when we ask, "how are you?" We really want to know.